

THE AUGUST

Lincoln. p. 136.

Sunset

THE MAGAZINE ^{OF} THE PACIFIC
AND OF ALL THE FAR WEST



Ferdinand Burger

THE BIRTHPLACE OF LINCOLN

By LUCIEN YOUNG

Interest in Lincoln memorabilia ran high during the first half of this year, stimulated by celebrations throughout the country marking the centenary of the great president's birth. The publication in the May number of SUNSET MAGAZINE of a hitherto unpublished lecture by Lincoln, with facsimile reproduction of the manuscript, was a notable contribution to the observance of his anniversary. An intense interest attaches naturally to the following brief article by Lucien Young, commandant of the Mare Island navy yard. Here are a few words, based upon the writer's exceptional opportunity for research into the history of Lincoln's family, which go to show that the honors recently heaped upon a rude log cabin, hailed as the birthplace of the nation's hero, were well meant but sadly mistaken, and that a changeling is to be cradled in commemorative marble.

THE recent centenary memorial celebrations of Abraham Lincoln's birth throughout the length and breadth of the United States brought forth many elaborate publications and oratorical effusions in a patriotic endeavor to do justice to the memory of the Martyr President. In all of these public assertions, there were many historical errors, none of which was more flagrant than the almost universal expression that the place of his birth was near Hodgenville, Kentucky. This error was conspicuously emphasized in the exercises attending the laying of the cornerstone of a memorial building on the Lincoln farm near Hodgenville; an exercise in which the President of the United States, governors from several states, and other distinguished gentlemen, took part. Furthermore, a rude log cabin figures extensively as being the hut in which Lincoln was born; an antique that evidently emanated from the fruitful brain of some imaginative and enthusiastic showman. As a boy in the '60s, I attended school at Hodgenville and used to romp and play over the Lincoln farm and I never saw any such cabin on the place then. This cabin, to be encased in the marble structure, is evidently a dingy structure of logs put together a few years ago to enhance the exhibition at Nashville, Tennessee, and subsequently sold to some exhibitors who took it about the country as a traveling show. The advertisement of this log cabin was

profuse. Even a neighbor of the Lincolns was found to testify that he went to Hodgenville for the doctor to attend the birth of Abraham. The notoriety thus obtained soon brought the farm itself, then known as the Rock Spring farm, before the public, but it was not until as late as 1905 that it became of actual significance by its purchase at a public auction by a New York speculator. He, in turn, disposed of the place to an enterprising group of American citizens who incorporated under the laws of New York as the Lincoln Farm Association. This association began to raise funds by a popular subscription throughout the whole country and with these funds they purchased some old logs found in a cellar at College Point, Long Island, said to be the remains of the mythical cabin, which they put together and brought to the so called original site, there to be encased in a memorial building on the Lincoln farm, to be developed into a beautiful park.

That Lincoln once lived on this farm, went swimming in the nearby Nolin creek and formed his earliest mental development and recollection there before a huge fireplace in a little one-room cabin, there can be no dispute, but as to its being the birthplace of Lincoln there is serious doubt. That great man himself never knew where he was born and he went to his grave ignorant of the fact that his parents were actually married, a state of affairs that gave him little concern

until in the latter part of the '50s. At this time the repeal of the Missouri Compromise brought Lincoln into the remarkable debates with Stephen A. Douglas, in which every weapon of logic was employed and every field of illustration was exhausted and in which Lincoln, by his chaste and lofty eloquence, his simplicity and power, forced Douglas to an ignominious defeat and a cowardly retort reflecting upon the status of Lincoln's parents which wounded the feelings of Lincoln more than any vituperation and abuse that ever emanated from his political opponents and it preyed upon his mind until his death. He made no answer to these unprovoked insinuations and malicious calumnies, but instead he quietly made every effort and used every endeavor from that time until Booth's pistol rang down the curtain of his life, to obtain the undisputed evidence of the facts that surrounded his coming into the world.

Unfortunately his earliest recollections only carried him back to the little home near Hodgenville and not to the place of his birth. He made a careful research and exhaustive inquiry of all the records, civil and religious, and of all persons and papers throughout Harden and Larue counties (Hodgenville is the county seat of Larue county), and of course he found no data or information, as there never was any there. To all of the inquiries made of him by his early biographers, Lincoln, with a sense of tameness and a conviction that it would be of little interest to the American people, invariably answered, "My early history was the short and simple annals of the poor." All took it for granted that the place he spoke of as his Kentucky home was the place of his birth and their writings have been generally accepted by the public and subsequent historians as being founded on facts.

Had early investigations been made in Washington county, Kentucky, instead of confining them to Harden county as was done, the truth would have been ascertained that Lincoln was born there, near the town of Springfield. His paternal grandfather, Abraham Lincoln, emigrated with his family from Rockingham county, Virginia, to Kentucky about 1780 and settled in Bullitt county, and three or four years after, while working in the fields, he was assassinated by Indians. The care of five helpless children was, by

this murder, thrown upon his widow and she subsequently moved with the little brood to what was afterwards Washington county. Of these children, the third son was Thomas, the father of Abraham. Thomas was a wandering, laboring, ignorant boy and he grew up without any education. At the age of twenty-eight he married Nancy Hanks, who was born in the Shenandoah valley of Virginia and came to Kentucky as a servant. Tom and Nancy were intensely religious and they belonged to the sect then known as hardshell Baptists and they were married by a deacon of that church in the little town of Springfield, the county seat of Washington county.

When I was a small boy I attended school a few miles from this village, with the sons of old Tom Hardesty, and used to visit his home and I remember well the stories the old man told of this wedding, and that he was a witness thereto. I have also heard the late Senator Voorhees of Indiana, whose mother was a Hardesty, tell the same and that Thomas Lincoln took his bride to a rude log cabin he had prepared for her, both miserably poor, and in this humble home two children were born to them, the first a daughter, Sarah, who died young, and the second was Abraham. That when Abraham was about two years old the parents moved to another log cabin near Nolin creek, close to Hodgenville in that part of Hardin which is now Larue county, and here a third child, Thomas, was born. Hence, if any neighbors ever went to Hodgenville for a doctor to attend Mrs. Lincoln, it was for the birth of Thomas and not for the birth of Abraham. When Abraham was about seven years old his parents moved again to a still more primitive home near South Bend in Indiana, and there his mother died. A little more than a year after her death, Thomas Lincoln married and brought to his home in Indiana, Mrs. Sally Johnston of Elizabethtown, Kentucky, and Abraham thus passed into the care of a stepmother and from that time on his history is well known.

It is a remarkable coincidence that he should have selected Springfield, Illinois, as his permanent home, and that his final resting place should be near there, a city of the same name as the little village in Kentucky where his parents were married and where he was born.

